



Trapper Nelson, A Remembrance

His birth name was Vincent Natulkiewicz. But that was an unimportant detail. To all of us in Jupiter, he was Trapper Nelson. (He said that he changed his last name because people couldn't pronounce it, and while he was at it, his first name because a Trapper was what he was. He had been continually trapping animals to earn money since adolescence.) To people outside of Jupiter he was known as the Tarzan of the Loxahatchee. Tarzan was apt in that he bore a good resemblance to Johnny Weissmuller, the original movie Tarzan. He was powerfully built, six feet four inches tall and about two hundred and forty pounds, heavily muscled, with a handsome face and an engaging smile that made people immediately like him. And similar to Weissmuller, he was like a fish in the water. More relevant to the comparison, he lived with the wild animals in the jungly headwaters of the Loxahatchee River.

He arrived in the little village of Jupiter on the southeast coast of Florida as a hobo in a railroad boxcar in the 1931. It was said that he came from the far West, which was true. Rumor had it that he was engaged in mining out there, probably not true. And, since rumors encourage embellishment, it was further rumored that the mining involved gold, which was almost certainly not true. Not long after arriving in Jupiter, he went up the Loxahatchee River, which runs through Jupiter, and settled at its origin.

He chose wisely. There, a jungle of Spanish moss festooned trees and thick undergrowth grew in a swamp, the habitat of raccoons, otters, alligators, and water moccasins. The swamp fed water into a deep pool, about a hundred yards across. The pool was the beginning of the River. The swamp in turn was surrounded by a limitless expanse of higher ground populated by a pine scrub of pine trees, palmettos and various shrubs. The scrub was the habitat of deer, wild boars, wildcats, panthers and rattlesnakes. (The panthers were not a transplanted African species but a Florida native, found only in Florida.) He trapped all of these animals.



Trapper's Place. Trapper standing by the boat. The "swing rope" cypress tree to the left.

He sold live animals to zoos, the fur from the mammals, and the skins from the alligators and snakes. As time went on he sold live alligators to alligator farms and poisonous snakes to medical enterprises experimenting with venom. He began buying the land around him. Though he didn't have a lot of money, the land was very cheap in pre-development Jupiter because it wasn't useful for anything. He built a cabin from felled trees. He dug a pit to hold the alligators, another for the snakes, and set up cages for the other animals, many of which, like the black panthers, were exotic. People, hearing about this wild man and his "zoo", began to come up the river to see for themselves. Sensing another source of revenue, he coined the name "Trapper's Zoo and Jungle Gardens". He built a long dock along the cabin side of the pool. He set up



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pavilions, which were corrugated metal roofs raised up on poles with all sides open, strung up hammocks and set up barbecue pits. He charged for boats to dock for the day and a fee for using the pavilions. A “Jungle Cruise” boat regularly carried tourists there from West Palm Beach. He charged them admission. He cut in a sand roadway so people could come by car and charged admission. The cars created a bit of a problem because some people considered it good sport to run over snakes. Since snakes were a reliable source of revenue for him, he wanted to protect them. So he put up a sign at the entrance. I don’t remember the exact words, but they were something like: Attention Don’t Run Over The Snakes.

As money came in, he bought more property. He had only an eighth grade education, yet he proved to be an astute businessman. Possibly his habit of regularly reading the *Wall Street Journal* helped. Though he never had a lot of money, he used it to excellent advantage, buying tracts of land at bargain prices, much of it during the depression, often by simply paying off back taxes. He eventually accumulated over a thousand acres, including river frontage. He figured out how to make the land, which was originally worthless to everyone else, provide him with a living whilst living the life he loved. In the end, that worthless land made him a potential millionaire.

Since he was very personable, he made an excellent host. He clearly enjoyed his visitors. It was ironic that someone who preferred to live alone in a wild habitat far from people could be so gregarious. Another irony is that he didn’t have to live that way. After World War Two, when development started to stir in Jupiter, the land that he had accumulated was worth a lot of money. And, he had options to profit from his notoriety. Palm Beach society had discovered him, helped by the publicity of his prowess at wrestling alligators. He got invitations, which he accepted, to come to various functions there and to bring along some of his wild creatures. With his exceptional good looks and “Tarzan” persona he was attractive to wealthy ladies. His presence in this milieu soon brought him to the attention of celebrities such as Gary Cooper and Gene Tunney, who visited his jungle gardens. He always greeted arrivals in his habitual costume, which was just kaki shorts and “Jungle Jim” pith helmet, no shirt, no shoes, showing off his magnificent physique to best advantage.

Trapper’s was a favorite place for us teenagers. Easy to get to since many of us had outboard motorboats, and we knew well how to navigate the river. He didn’t ask money from us because he just liked having us around, as long as we behaved, which we were careful to do. He had a gentle manner, but we knew he was not someone you wanted to cross. He had an old motor yacht, some fifty feet long moored at the far end of the pool. His friend, Ray Bowles, had towed it up there. An impressive feat with his little outboard-motor-powered skiff, up the narrow, winding river with hairpin turns, overarching tree branches and shallows everywhere. Ray pulled it off because he was a superb waterman, which was the result of spending half his life in his skiff doing all kinds of things on Jupiter waters. He knew these waters as well as the inside of his house.

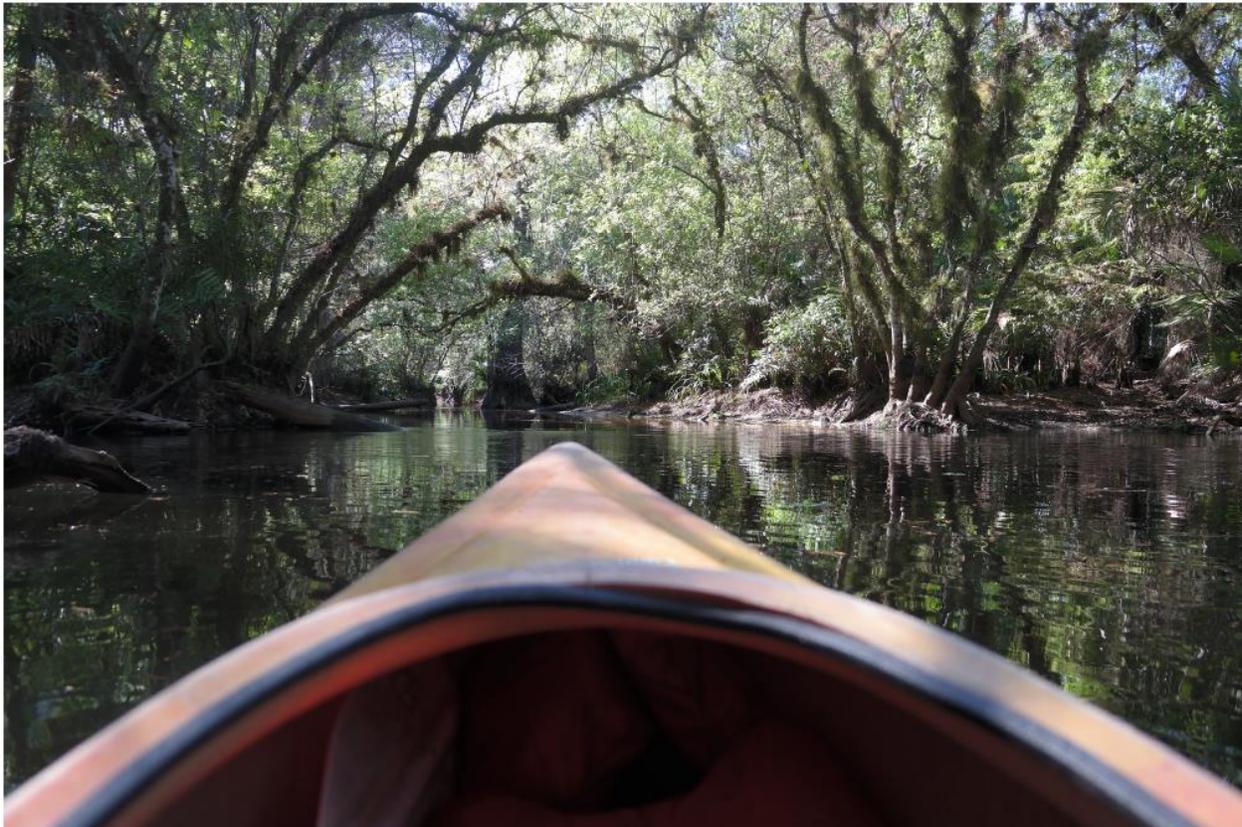
We hung out on the old yacht to stay out of the way. Trapper also liked that we provided some amusement for the visitors. There was an old cypress tree behind the dock. A rope was tied to the top. We would walk with the end up to high ground, run hard with it until our feet lifted



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off the ground and swing out over the river. At the top of the arc we would plunge in. We would also climb the tree, tightrope walk out on the limbs and dive into the pool. Naturally, there was a competition for the more daring to show off by seeing who would dive from the highest branches. This made a good show for the visitors.



Approaching Trapper's Place.

Trapper could also put on a good show. He would sometimes impress visitors by reaching into the snake pit and grabbing a rattlesnake by the neck and holding it up for all to see. One day, I was talking to him up by the alligator pit when we heard shouts from the pool of "alligator!" As those in the water frantically swam toward the dock, Trapper knocked off his pith helmet, ran to the dock and dove in. He surfaced just behind the gator, grabbed its tail, pulled it toward him, grabbed its snout and clamped it shut with his big hand. With much thrashing and splashing he man-handled it to shore and carried it and up lowered it into the gator pit. Trapper had a flair for the theatrical. Although it was a small gator, about five feet long, his visitors were certainly impressed.

Though he lived alone in his wilderness, he was not cut off from the world. He kept in contact with friends in town. He would come to town to get supplies, mail, the Wall Street Journal and the Sunday Miami Herald. He read the papers cover to cover. And, he had his radio. I was sometimes there when he was engaged in conversation with visitors. I was always impressed with how much he knew about a lot of subjects.



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In the late 1950s, he began complaining that the cost of tax on his land was mounting, but his income was not. Also, he was beginning to have problems with State authorities. It began with questions about the confinement conditions of the animals. He made changes to satisfy the authorities. Then they told him he had to install public toilets. Since he lived without electricity, plumbing of any kind, or a septic system, it meant that he had to install running water, plumbing and septic at considerable expense. Yet, he complied. State inspectors then told him that what he had installed was still not adequate. All of this was very troubling to all of us who knew him. We then heard that some officials from the State department of fish and wildlife had been seen around the property. Talk was that some in State government were interested in acquiring the property for a game refuge to which State officials could come to hunt and fish. Later events proved this wrong.

Out of school I had taken a job in West Palm Beach, and I had bought an old schooner, which I was restoring. I didn't have much free time so it had been a while since I had seen Trapper. One day, in late 1960, I went upriver with a couple of friends to see him. Coming around a bend on the approach to Trappers, our way was blocked by trees that had been felled across the river. There was a large hand painted sign that read "Private Property No Trespassing". We hesitated. This must be meant for others, surely he couldn't mean us. We knew the river well. We could have bypassed the barrier and worked our way through the maze of narrow waterways alternating with high ground hummocks populated with sawtooth palmettos. However, we knew that something was wrong, and that Trapper obviously wanted his privacy. He liked being with people, but when he wanted solitude he was determined to have it. We had to respect that. Later, back in town, I learned that he had also barricaded the land access.

I never saw Trapper again. I moved from Jupiter in 1965, but I frequently went back for visits. On a visit, somewhere around 1968, I got the terrible news that Trapper was dead, at only fifty-nine years old. Furthermore, it was under mysterious circumstances. He was found with a shotgun blast to the abdomen, with the gun by his side. The county coroner ruled it suicide.

Strangely however, his fingerprints were not on the gun, nor were any others. Further, Trapper, gun savvy hunter that he was, knew that if you were going to do yourself in, you do it with a clean, sure shot to the head, not the abdomen. However, there was speculation that it was murder. He certainly didn't lack for enemies. The crackers, poor descendants of the original settlers, traditionally survived by living off the land, hunting and trapping. The land that Trapper was buying, rich in prized wildlife, had always been exploited by them since ownership of the land had never been enforced. As Trapper bought more and more land, he closed it off to them, turning the land into his private trapping preserve. They could not have been pleased seeing their ancestral hunting areas closed to them. Nor, were they complacent. Some snuck in and poached what they needed. Ever vigilant, when Trapper caught them he forcibly ejected them. And then there was his brother. Before settling upriver, Trapper, his brother and a third partner shared a hut that they had built on Jupiter Island, and they worked together trapping. In an argument, the brother shot and killed the partner. Trapper was upset with his brother for what he did and at the trial refused to lie for him, instead testifying to a true account of the event. The



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brother was convicted. Because of this, the brother publicly swore to kill Trapper if he ever got out of prison. He was released in 1951. The police didn't question the brother.

It had long been rumored that he had a fortune hidden, the gold rumor again. It was speculated that someone had come after it. However, few were buying that theory. First of all, sneaking up on Trapper was thought to be impossible. He wasn't just attuned to the natural world around him; he was part of it. There were thousands of eyes and ears on the alert for danger. For any intrusion into this environment, the dynamics would change. Some creatures would suddenly go quiet whilst others would chirp an alarm. In addition, Trapper kept a flock of quite vigilant guinea fowl who would always set off a ruckus in case of intrusion. Also, he had lately taken to keeping a shotgun with him. As for treasure, the cabin had not been ransacked. And if Trapper did have a cache of gold, he would have used it to settle his financial problems. After his death, State park employees working on restoring the buildings did find a small collection of old coins but they were worth less than two thousand dollars.

Trapper's death will always be a mystery. On the one hand, was the case for suicide. Trapper's health had been declining, which was weighing on him. He had been experiencing stomach pains. He was concerned that it might be cancer. But, he refused to see a doctor because he didn't trust them ever since his brother-in-law died from a botched operation. And he had been worried that the modern world was closing in. He suspected that the State of Florida coveted his land. But worst of all, he believed that developers were circling. Jupiter had been discovered by developers. Trapper loved his land. He feared that machines would be coming to sweep his world away. He thought that there was a plan to get rid of him through economic pressure from taxation and from harassment by the State authorities.

On the other hand, the case against suicide was based on something that happened before his death that changed everything. The State parks department had made him a very tempting offer. Part of the Jonathan Dickinson State Park, located on the north side of the river, came up to the river just a little downriver from Trapper's. The State offered to pay him a seven figure sum for his land, allow him to live on it the rest of his life, and assured him that it would be protected forever from development by being incorporated into the park. According to his close friends and family, Trapper was ecstatic over this development. He believed that his problems were over, and that he was going to take the State up on its offer.

I have visited a lot of spectacularly beautiful places in the world. But have found none more beautiful in its way than Jonathan Dickinson State Park, particularly now that it encompasses Trapper Nelson's land. I will always treasure the memory of myself and my special friends, girls and guys, on the deck of the old motor yacht, drying off in the sun after a swim in the Loxahatchee pool, and looking across it to Trapper in shorts and pith helmet at the dock greeting a boatload of visitors, and conducting them up to see his exotic animal collection.

